

A22 FRIDAY, OCTOBER 21, 1988

# The Washington Post

## To Reunite Korea

**O**F ALL THE countries left divided as a result of World War II, none—not Germany, not China, not Vietnam—can have suffered more than Korea. Moscow put the North in the grasp of a communist regime that to this day makes life wretched for most of those who live under it. The South has had to bear the twin burdens of the North's war and terrorism and of long stretches of home-grown military rule. Even so, the South has recorded enough economic and political progress to bring it the honor, and the opportunity to show off its achievements, of being host to the Olympics. There is a widespread sense that Korea has fairly earned a better national future. This lends a poignancy to the prospect now coming tentatively into view.

That prospect is reunification. For decades it was beyond imagining, but now the two Koreas are edging that way. In South Korea it is true that progress toward democracy exposes the leadership to popular longings to lower the barrier that North Korea has made of the 38th parallel. But it also matters a great deal that the East-West rivalry, which created and sustained the division of Korea, is taking on a different character. The Soviets and Chinese sent their athletes to the Seoul Olympics, which the North, utterly isolating itself, boycotted. Moscow and Peking responded

to American urgings to make sure that North Korea did not commit terrorist attacks during the games.

In North Korea the leader is the longtime dictator, aggressor and terrorist Kim Il Sung, who is 76 and whose death many see as a necessary prelude to real progress.

In the South, President Roh Tae Woo, a member of a military clique whose influence is still strong, has nonetheless demonstrated a measure of respect for and adeptness in electoral politics. Probably no one who could not calm a skeptical military could expect to carry off the initiatives in democracy and reunification he is taking now. In his mind is the picture of a people whose 13 centuries of ethnic homogeneity easily can ride over a mere few decades of artificial division. Its dependence on American patronage gives South Korea a certain anti-American tendency; to exploit it, the North pursues a negotiating strategy aimed at prying out American troops. The South, meanwhile, emphasizes step-by-step confidence-building and a diplomacy designed to draw the North out of its shell. The going is necessarily slow, but President Roh deserves every encouragement in his hope to see Korea reunited before the end of the century.